

FROM BIRTH TO SEVENTEEN: The Living Arrangements of Children, 1998

A growing number of children live in single-parent homes.

Where children live and grow up and the conditions that contribute to their well-being are all indicators monitored by the U.S. Census Bureau. Health care professionals, school planners, and childcare providers look to these numbers to decide if new facilities or services are needed. Census information on the living arrangements of children helps researchers understand the social implications of the different types of family situations that children experience while growing up.

Words That Count

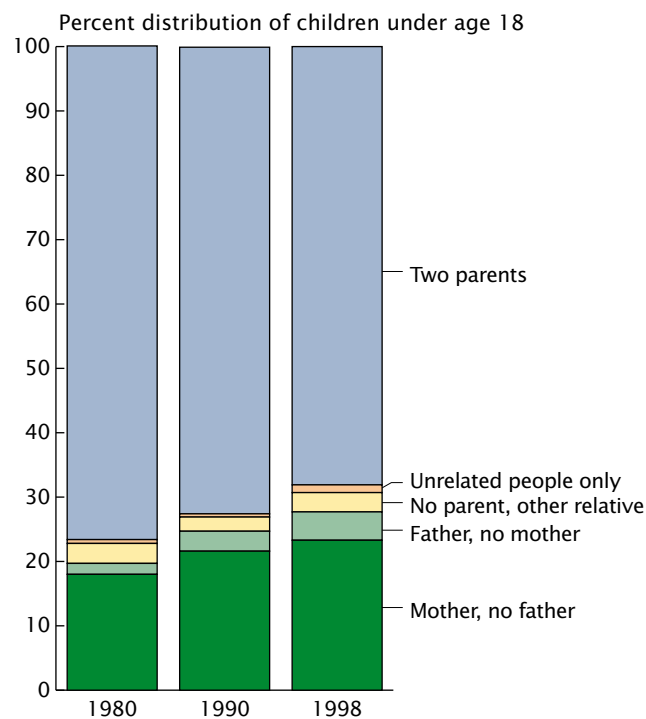
- **Children** are all people under age 18, excluding those who maintain households, families, or subfamilies as a householder or spouse.
- **Own children** in a family are sons and daughters, including stepchildren and adopted children, of the householder. For each type of family unit identified in the Current Population Survey, the count of “own children under 18 years old” is limited to never-married children; however, “own children under 25” and “own children of any age,” as the terms are used here, include all children regardless of marital status. The counts include never-married children living away from home in college dormitories.
- **Related children** in a family include own children and all other children under 18 years old in the household who are related to the householder by birth, marriage, or adoption, such as grandchildren.

The majority of the 71 million children who live in the United States live with two parents.

In 1980, 77 percent of all children under age 18 lived with two parents, falling to 73 percent in 1990 and only 68 percent by 1998, according to the Current Population Survey (CPS). Over the 18-year period, the share of children living with only their mother rose from 18 percent to 23 percent and the share living with only their father grew from less than 2 percent to about 4 percent. In 1998, about 3 percent of children lived with other relatives and about 1 percent lived with people who were not relatives.

Figure 6-1.

Living Arrangements of Children Under Age 18: 1980, 1990, and 1998



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys, March 1980, 1990, and 1998.

Single parents were more likely to be never married or divorced than widowed or separated, according to the 1998 CPS. Among children living with their mother alone, 40 percent of mothers had never been married

Figure 6-2.

Children Under Age 18 Living With One Parent by Sex and Marital Status of Parent: 1998

(Percent distribution)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, March 1998 Current Population Survey.

while another 34 percent were divorced. Almost the reverse was true for children living with their fathers alone. About 33 percent lived with a never-married father and 44 percent lived with a divorced father.¹ The next largest share of children lived with a parent who was married, but whose spouse was absent. This was the case for 21 percent of children who lived with a mother alone and for 18 percent of children who lived with father alone. Only about 4 percent of children lived with a widowed parent, regardless of whether they lived with their mother or father.²

In the early 1990s, researchers, policy makers, and the media began to notice an increase in the number of children living in a home maintained by a grandparent. By 1998, the CPS found 4 million children — about 6 percent of all children — living in the home of their grandparent. At least one parent was present for almost two-thirds of these children. However, only 13 percent of children who lived in a grandparent's home had both a mother and a father living with them. The greatest share, 46 percent, lived with a mother, but no father. Another 6 percent lived with a father, but no mother. There was no parent in the home of the remaining 36 percent of children who lived with a grandparent.

¹ There is no significant difference between the percentage of children living with a single father who was never married and the percentage of children living with a single mother who was divorced.

² There is no significant difference between the percentage of children living with a single father who was widowed and the percentage of children living with a single mother who was widowed.

SPOTLIGHT ON CHILD WELL-BEING

Living arrangements, economic and social environments, and types of neighborhoods contribute to child well-being and future development.

- **Children in two-parent families fare better developmentally than children in single-parent families, according to a recent study based on data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP).** Among the problems associated with children of single parents are low measures of academic achievement, increased likelihood of dropping out of high school, and early childbearing.
- **Diminished contact with the noncustodial parent can result in a loss of emotional support and supervision from adults.** Children in single-parent families generally have a lower economic standard of living and more frequently participate in government assistance programs than do children from two-parent families. The SIPP indicates all of these circumstances have a cumulative effect on the way children grow up and how prepared they are for young adulthood.
- **Neighborhood safety concerns, trust in neighbors to look out for each other, and the presence of negative influences in their children's environment were just a few of the topics explored in the 1993 panel of the SIPP.** Responses to questions on neighborhood trust and safety were combined into an index where a score of ten

indicated the best neighborhood situation. On average, parents gave their neighborhoods a rating of 6.6, indicating children were living in neighborhoods that are not ideal, but are far from unsatisfactory. However, the neighborhood index was higher for children living with two working parents (7.1) than for children in other types of households. Among single parents, the neighborhood score was 6.1 when the parent was employed and 5.1 when the parent was unemployed.

- **Being cared for by someone other than a family member is an increasingly common experience in a child's preschool years, according to the SIPP.** About 53 percent of all children under age 12 have been cared for regularly by someone other than immediate family members. Among children less than 3 years old, 46 percent had been in regular child care. On average, children less than 3 years old began their first child care experience at 6 months old and spent 30 hours each week in care.
- **Government assistance³ does not appear to be a contributing factor in whether a child has been in a regular child care arrangement, according to the SIPP.** The share of poor children aged 3 to 5 who were in child care was about the same whether or not they received government assistance — 47 percent and 49 percent, respectively. For children in families with incomes of 100 percent to 199 percent of the poverty threshold, about 60 percent of those in families using assistance were in child care, compared with 56 percent of those in families who did not receive assistance.

³ For a discussion on children in poverty and government assistance programs, see Chapter 13.

In spring 1998, 14 million parents had custody of 23 million children under 21 years of age⁴ whose other parent lived somewhere else, according to the Current Population Survey (CPS).

- **More custodial parents worked and participation in public programs declined.** Between 1993 and 1997, the CPS found that the proportion of custodial parents employed in full-time, year-round jobs increased from 46 percent to 51 percent. At the same time the proportion participating in at least one public assistance program declined from 41 percent to 34 percent.

⁴ Because child support is frequently ordered until a child is 21 years old or completes college, this report specifically includes "own children" under 21 rather than the usual definition used by the Census Bureau of children under 18 years of age.

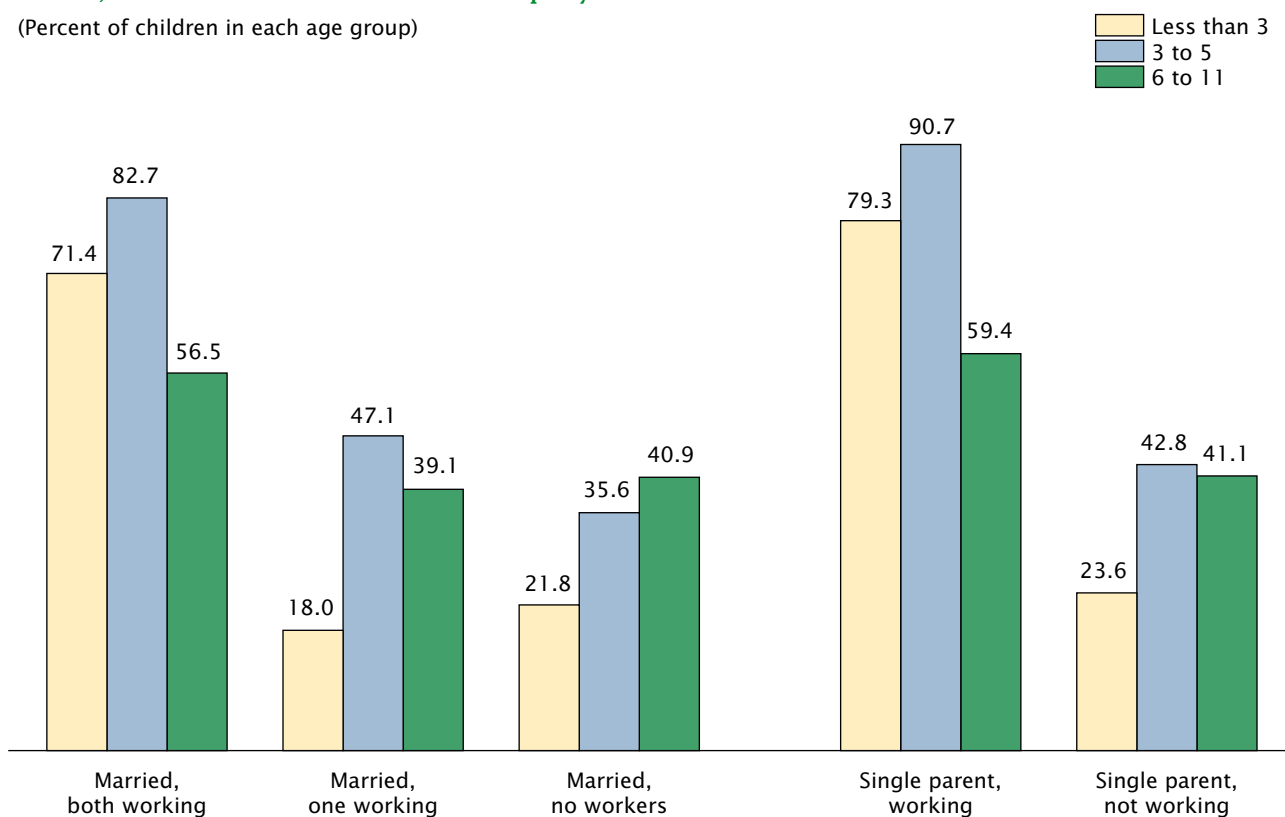
- **Between 1993 and 1997, poverty rates, although still quite high, declined for custodial parents.** While the 1997 poverty rate for all families was about 16 percent, the rate for custodial mothers (32 percent) was nearly three times higher than it was for custodial fathers (11 percent), according to the CPS.

- **Fifty-six percent of custodial parents had child support agreements, according to the 1998 CPS.** Most of these agreements were considered legal and were established by a court or other government entity. However, 4 percent of custodial parents had nonlegal informal agreements or understandings. Custodial mothers were more likely than custodial fathers to be awarded child support, 59 percent compared with 38 percent.

Figure 6-3.

Children Under Age 12 Who Have Ever Been in Child Care by Age of Child, and Parents' Marital and Employment Status: 1994

(Percent of children in each age group)



Note: Employment status is for the month before the survey.

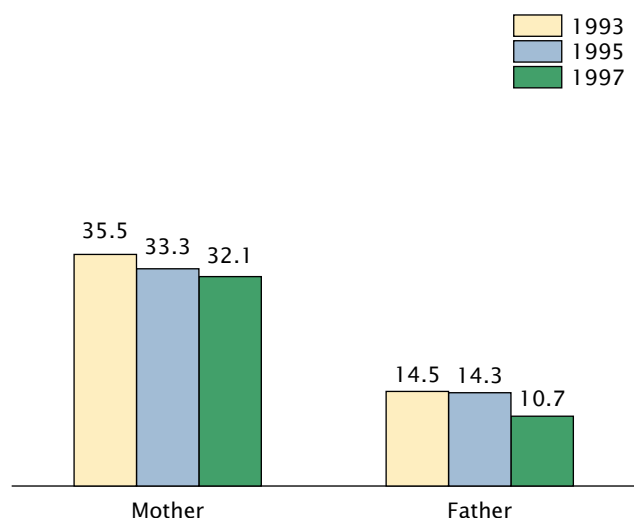
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1992 Panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (October 1994 - January 1995) and 1993 Panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (October 1994 - January 1995).

- **In 1997, more custodial parents were receiving the full payments and fewer received partial payments, according to the CPS.** Of the 7.9 million parents with child support agreements or awards, about 7 million were due payments in 1997. Of these, about two-thirds reported receiving either part or full payment, statistically unchanged from 1993. However, the proportion of custodial parents receiving all payments they were due increased from 35 percent to 41 percent, while those receiving partial payments fell from 35 percent to 27 percent. The average amount of support received by custodial mothers who received any payment in 1997 was \$3,700, not statistically different from the amount received by custodial fathers — \$3,300.

Figure 6-4.

Poverty Status of Custodial Mothers and Fathers: 1993, 1995, and 1997

(Percent of custodial parents in poverty)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, April 1994, 1996, and 1998 Current Population Surveys.

- **Child support compliance was highly influenced by joint custody and visitation.** Among the 7 million custodial parents due child support in 1997, the CPS found most (84 percent) had arrangements with the nonresident parents for joint custody or visitation privileges with their children. Although about 73 percent of these parents received at least some of their child support payments, only 36 percent without joint custody or visitation arrangements received any payment.

The Census Bureau Can Tell You More

- For more detailed information, consult the following U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Report: *A Child's Day: Home, School, and Play (Selected Indicators of Child Well-Being): 1994* by Jason M. Fields, Loretta E. Bass, Kristin Smith, and Terry Lugaila.
- Look for complete reports and detailed tables on the Census Bureau's World Wide Web site (www.census.gov). Click on "M" and select "Marital Status and Living Arrangements," "H" and select "Households," or "C" and select "Child Care" or "Child Support."
- Contact the Fertility and Family Statistics Branch of the U.S. Census Bureau at 301-457-2465 or e-mail pop@census.gov.
- For information on publications and other resources, see Appendix A.